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Incorporating movement with fluency instruction: A motivation for struggling readers

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"Ughh, I just can't do it," Erick (pseudonym) sighs as he pushes the book across his desk.

"You can, Erick. Listen again to how I read it." I position myself next to Erick and begin reading in my best expressive and fluent reader voice. "The wind blew across the field as if it were racing with the clouds. Jenny and Luke leaped over the marsh and ducked behind the horse trough."

The obviously frustrated fourth grader reluctantly pulls his book back across his desk and begins, "The wind bl...blow, no wait, blew across the...field...as if it...were racing...with the c...louds Jenny and Luke...leaped over the duck...no!" Looking defeated, Erick irritably shifts in his seat until he is sitting cross-legged and begins tapping his chewed up pencil against the back of his neck.

Does this interaction seem familiar? What is presented here is a portrayal of a reader who lacks reading fluency skills. In my experience as a reading teacher for struggling students, dysfluency is a common roadblock to effective reading and comprehension. Developing reading fluency, which is the ability to read accurately, automatically, and with expression, is a critical factor in reading success and is gaining increased attention as a goal of reading instruction (Rasinski, 2006; Samuels & Farstrup, 2006). Well-designed studies have demonstrated that rapid and automatic decoding of words, along with appropriate phrasing and prosody, can affect reading ability and comprehension skills (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Fluency instruction is particularly important for struggling readers who often have slow and laborious oral reading, which makes comprehension of text virtually impossible (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002).

Incorporating movement into fluency instruction

In my classroom, I focus on the method of repeated reading for fluency instruction, which has been rigorously researched and accepted as an effective technique for developing fluency and comprehension in all students, including those with learning disabilities (Chard et al., 2002; NICHD, 2000; Therrien, 2004). However, even with interesting, interpretive text and good teacher modeling, it is difficult to convince a reluctant reader that the best way for them to improve is to read the same passage over and over again. Therefore, incorporating the element of movement into fluency instruction has been pivotal in motivating my students to participate in the proven method of repeated reading. Not only are students keen to "get up and move," but also I believe movement conceptualizes the rhythmic nature of fluent, expressive reading and allows children to experience and "feel" how fluent reading should sound, while enhancing the learning process by stimulating the neural pathways responsible for retention and cognition (Jensen, 2000).

I have incorporated two fluency strategies into my reading programs that involve movement and have been motivational and effective for grades two to six in both regular and special needs literacy classrooms. The first strategy is Readers Theatre, which involves rehearsing a passage, incorporating movements such as actions, gestures, and facial expressions, and presenting it to an audience with script in hand. Tyler and Chard (2000) described Readers Theatre as an authentic venue for rereading the same text several times while motivating the most reluctant of readers. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/1999) observed the element of per-

formance as a powerful motivator for fluency practice by their second graders throughout their study on the effects of Readers Theatre on fluency skills. Comprehension was enhanced, as well, when students interpreted the actions and the feelings of the characters they had become, which “sharpen[ed] their insights into the literature for themselves and their listeners” (Martinez et al., p. 329). In my literacy classes, I have witnessed similar results with Readers Theatre, and my students—even the most timid and reluctant—exude confidence and experience tremendous growth. Aaron Shepard’s (2004) collection of resources entitled *Readers on Stage*, along with his website, www.aaronsherp.com/rt/, provide excellent tips for scripting, directing, and teaching Readers Theatre to children of all ages.

Introducing Rhythm Walks

Because a multidimensional approach is an important key to reading success for struggling students (Pressley, Gaskins, & Fingeret, 2006), my fluency instruction is supplemented with another fun, motivating repeated reading strategy which incorporates movement. It is an activity I call Rhythm Walks.

The opening vignette of this article described a student’s reading behavior that was slow, disjointed, and cumbersome. This common scenario illustrates a theory indicating that fluency problems stem not only from difficulty decoding isolated words, but also from difficulty chunking sentences into meaningful phrases regardless of proficient decoding skills (Therrien, 2004). In my experience, when students read in a tedious, hesitant manner, they are unable to understand the text or respond to it inferentially or personally. Samuels (1997) described the theory of automatic information processing where a fluent reader decodes text automatically, thus leaving attention free for interpreting the text. The purpose of Rhythm Walks is to draw attention to the natural breaks and phrasing of text through purposeful “steps” or movements, while the repetition through the Rhythm Walk helps build both fluency and comprehension. A rhythm walk with the entire class is structured like this:

Getting ready

- We choose a short poem, story, or even an informational text for our Rhythm Walk.

- We analyze the text and decide where there are natural breaks and appropriate chunks as indicated through punctuation, line breaks, or contextual cues.
- We write each “chunk” of text on a big rectangular strip of card stock.
- We place the strips, in order, in a curvy or straight pathway on the floor around the classroom, ensuring that each strip is only one step away from the other.
- Students line up in single file at the start of the Rhythm Walk.

The Rhythm Walk

- Starting at the first strip, the first student reads this aloud and then takes a step to the next strip and reads that one. They continue walking and reading as they make their way through the Rhythm Walk and complete the poem or passage.
- Each student begins when the student in front of them has completed the first three strips.
- When a student gets to the end of the Rhythm Walk, they line up at the beginning and repeat the process
- I usually allow each student to circulate through the Rhythm Walk 3–10 times depending on the length of the passage, which has been anywhere from 4 to 25 strips.

Closure

- First of all, it is often difficult to call an end to this activity as the students love parading around the room and exhibiting the improvements in their oral reading. They beg to do it “just one more time!” Therefore, an echo clap or chant to call attention is usually helpful.
- Students return to the original passage to independently practice transferring their new reading skills to the connected text.
- We finish with an activity such as a response journal or discussion questions in order to facilitate and monitor comprehension of the passage.

Variations and differentiation

Movement through a Rhythm Walk focuses on the fluidity, appropriate speed, and natural phrasing of fluent reading. As students repeat the walk, they demonstrate remarkable growth in their fluency, and as their confidence grows, they begin to add variety to their steps and move and read in creative ways as indicated by the text. For example, they may tiptoe during a whisper or stomp to add emphasis. They learn from listening to one another

and experiment with expression and articulation with every walk through the pathway. One of my students complimented her fellow classmate, "I like how you make your voice big and excited!" Students often challenge themselves to read faster by recording their times. As Rasinski (2000) pointed out, "to ignore reading rate when assessing children's reading and designing appropriate instruction may do a major disservice to many readers who struggle with reading" (p. 150). However, it is important to emphasize that good fluent reading is not just about being "super speedy." To ensure appropriately paced, rhythmical movements and reading, I often play classical music while the children parade through their Rhythm Walk. What a sight to see and hear the entire class, most of whom are typically reluctant readers, enthusiastically and fluently reciting a passage to the soft strains of a violin concerto while performing what appears to be an elaborate line dance around the classroom.

In order to differentiate instruction, Rhythm Walks may be experienced as a whole class, in small groups, or by individuals. Research has indicated that a student's reading ability level should be closely matched to the readability level of the text in order to achieve gains in fluency skills (Samuels & Farstrup, 2006). Therefore, depending on the reading levels of the students in my classroom, I have had different Rhythm Walks occurring at the same time, or have incorporated this activity into reading centers with small groups or individuals. Occasionally, I have added an element of paired reading—which is also a proven fluency intervention for students with learning disabilities (Chard et al., 2002)—by partnering stronger readers with struggling readers and having them read and walk in unison. One day I heard a student exclaim, "Yes, my walking partner is here!" when I asked the grade five class to partner up with my second graders in their Rhythm Walks. Although I have only used Rhythm Walks with grades two to six, I can imagine the motivation and benefits to using Rhythm Walks to decipher the fluency and phrasing of Spanish oral reading in junior high or Shakespeare in high school.

Six essential elements of Rhythm Walks

1. Choose the right text. It should be short, engaging and at the appropriate reading level.
2. Chunk the words into manageable sizes. For example: The eensy weensy spider / climbed up the water spout / down came the rain / and washed the spider out / out came the sun/ and dried up all the rain / and the eensy weensy spider / climbed up the spout again.
3. Write big. Letters should be about an inch and a half high so students are not hunching over to read.
4. Model first. Take your turn through the Rhythm Walk by demonstrating fluid movements as well as the key elements of fluency: accuracy, rate and prosody.
5. Sit back and let the students move. Allow for creativity and learning to evolve.
6. Go back to the original text. It is essential for students to practice their fluency skills with the original connected text.

The importance of motivation for struggling readers

Reading teachers today have an increased awareness of the proven benefits of fluency instruction and repeated reading. Our task now is to implement these strategies in ways that are effective and motivational, in order to engage students and ultimately improve both their oral reading and comprehension skills. Motivation is particularly important for struggling students because they often require repeated opportunities with effective instruction in order to begin demonstrating measurable improvements and transferring these skills to new situations (Therrien, 2004). Recent brain research showed that students with fluency difficulties required intensive, ongoing instruction with evidence-based activities, such as repeated reading, which activated the occipitotemporal region of the brain bringing about "significant and durable changes in brain organization so the struggling reader's brain activation patterns come to re-

semble those of typical readers" (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004, p. 9).

Incorporating movement into fluency instruction enhances the brain's capacity to learn and also holds the motivational appeal to endure intensive and extensive repeated reading methods. Activities such as Readers Theatre and the Rhythm Walk orchestrate the essential elements of fluency instruction while providing the motivational incentive for students who would rather move about than sit at a desk and reread passages. One of my struggling students once created his own variation of the Rhythm Walk by pacing at the back of the classroom during independent reading time. I have witnessed in my literacy instruction that movement holds the key to connecting struggling students to the art of reading fluently and motivating them to read over and over again. So my message is simple—get up and move!

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